The Last Brahmin

Shailesh BR

Curator: Vitarka Samuh

14.02. - 03.05.2020
The Indian artist Shailesh BR was born in 1986 in South India and sees himself as his family’s last Brahmin. Through this exhibition, he strives to sort out the various practices of castes by referring to ancient knowledge and customs. The exhibition space, its objects and rituals are based on the layout of a traditional Brahmin house. Shailesh BR appropriates this space with his presence there every day, as if it were his dwelling. By inviting all to enter his space, The Last Brahmin relinquishes discrimination based on the caste system, opening the way to conversation. He shares his personal memories to create empathy weaving the events of his life into a visual narrative.
Shailesh BR considers himself The Last Brahmin in his family. The source of his self-proclaimed title emerges from The Last Brahmin: Life and Reflections of a Modern-Day Sanksrit Pandit, a book authored by Rani Siva Sankara Sarma published in 2012, an autobiographical work positioned as a narrative of learning, scholarship, and the rigours of pedagogical discipline.

In the show, The Last Brahmin, Shailesh BR endeavours to unravel various layers of caste practice revisiting its core structure, decoding the idea of inheritance, formation and deformation. The Last Brahmin will refer to ancient knowledge and practices but will interpret it further by being present in it to find awareness of its meaning in today's socio-political paradigm. Living away from home, and the holy land itself, will offer a spiritual exile - a time for deep meditation, introspection and implosion.

Though the spatial divisions and partitions will be imaginary, the exhibition space, its objects and rituals will be based on a traditional Brahminical house plan and its associated usage governed by the laws of Vastu Shastra* (traditional system of architecture). «For people of other castes, entry into a Brahmin’s house continues to be restricted in my village, which must create a curiosity amongst them about what we look like inside.» He intends to challenge these Brahminical mores of hospitality. “The position I maintain is that anyone can be a Brahmin simply by being exposed to certain systems of knowledge. Therefore, it must follow that anyone can enter a Brahmin’s house as well.” With an open invite to one and all to enter his space, The Last Brahmin desists caste based discrimination and opens the door to conversation.

As a show, The Last Brahmin will have a beginning and an end, becoming an experiential chapter within itself, whether of great revelations or ... deeper confusions, time will tell. The Last Brahmin will take possession of his space and prepare it for an opening ceremony when an unrestricted world will be welcomed to enter, observe, inspect, participate, and exit anytime over 3 lunar cycles. “I have observed these cycles of rituals to have the pattern of Projecting > Maintaining > Suffocating with hypnotic monotony.” He will begin these days with Sandhavandanam*, an elaborate prayer routine that includes reciting the Vedas*, meditating and performing yoga-yaga. He intends to sustain a ritualistic fire through the period, even if it is the size of a candle flame. Through the days, depending on his «State of Mind» he will express himself through writings and drawings. He will embrace and maintain the Janeu* - the holy thread, everyday. The Last Brahmin will mark the end of this observation period with a closing ceremony to culminate his learnings and interpretations of this chapter.
The Last Brahmin intends to blur any perceived boundaries between anyone who comes to visit him. The bramin/artist shares personal memories to create friendship, empathy and familiarity by interweaving his life events into a visual narrative and incorporating religious and introspective elements alongside stimulating research material. Shailesh has been conceptually (d)evolving as The Last Brahmin with drawings, paintings, sculptures, found objects and machines. This chapter of spiritual exploration will also include artistic interventions with traditional mediums like palm leaves which were used to create manuscripts, examining the compulsive practice of puja* (worship), and the antiquity of traditional daily-use objects and sacred Brahminical accessories.

Vitarka Samuh

*See glossary at the end of the document.
Unravelling the layers of the caste system in India by philosophically revisiting its core structure rather than following the conflicted one - intervening deep into its formation and deformation, decoding the idea of inheritance of tradition, and the monotony of everyday rituals and practices. Enter the sacred space of a Brahmin house to experience, inquire, and challenge the notions from your own perspective.

The Melting Lotus (Sahasrara), 2020
Wood sculpture, paraffin, tealand
Variable dimension
Production Villa Arson Nice
Like the state of mind, life too is in a constant state of formation and deformation - no matter which caste one is born into. One of the most significant Hindu pilgrimages takes devotees on a long, arduous journey to witness an ice Linga* in a cave that is naturally formed from the freezing of water drops that fall from a crevice in the roof. Just like the Linga in the Amarnath cave is not the same every year or even every moment, life and all its moments too, form, deform, and reform, while we learn, grow, share and change. Without these changes, how shall we find a higher being as a host of our spirit when we leave this body? Without change can there ever be moksha* (liberation)? And if the constant of change is interpreted from the Hindu belief of formation and deformation, then why are they so many limitations to the spirit based on its birth in a body?
**Page Turner (Ulta Pulta), 2020**
Kinetic sculpture with book and machine
101x46x33 cm
Production Villa Arson Nice
The power of spiritual knowledge rests at the top of the hierarchy - only with the Brahmins*. But are they using this power of learning to push the needle forward by interpreting and reinterpreting sacred texts for the greater good of humankind or is the needle stuck at the rote ritual of turning the pages?

**Abdul Munaf and Abdul Farookh, 2020**
Acrylic, ink and adhesive on canvas
228x154 cm
Production Villa Arson Nice
The caste system defines stringent borders in relationships and friendships. It is impressed upon the learning mind when it is open, young and playful, to systematically acknowledge the 'differences' of identity. The painting serves to conjure the presence of two separated childhood friends and a formative lesson in discrimination. The artist and the painting wonder how they look today - would the Abdul brothers wear something as stereotypical as The Last Brahmin imagines?
Tail of a Dog (Shwapuchchha), 2020
Sculpture and multimedia (video, fiberglass, wires and accessories)
Variable dimension
Production Villa Arson Nice
The tail of a dog can never be straightened. The caste system binds both the body and spirit based on birth through the rest of life - for some with the sacred cord, and some with the noose of lifelong discrimination. Everyday rituals strengthen these knots and maintain the loop of spiritual inheritance. But will the tiresome burden of ritualistic monotony carried by the body, tip the scales in favour of the human spirit?

Possessions spirituelles
Collection of 57 antique household objects
Variable dimension
Production Villa Arson Nice
A Brahmin’s spiritual duty is of maintaining the holy law and equilibrium in roles such as a priest or a guru. But material objects are integral to these spiritual occupations too. These are handed down over hundreds of years of ancestry maintaining the inheritance from generation to generation, concealed behind the closed doors of a Brahmin’s house.
Puja Machine (Prayer Machine), 2020
Kinetic sculpture based on mixed techniques
Variable dimension
Production Villa Arson Nice

You have the right to perform your actions, but you are not entitled to the fruit of the action.

The Brahmins are conferred the duties of prayer rituals and ceremonies as only they have the right to acquiring spiritual knowledge, and are considered by birth as those on the path to 'Brahma'*. But if a machine takes on the ritual of performing prayers, can it also find a connection with the higher being, and gain enlightenment?

Holy Sticks, 2020
Print on paper, wood
Variable dimension
Production Villa Arson Nice

“A Brahmin’s life is a collection of insecurities”.
Through life, they collect wood from nature that is used in fire ceremonies at home or eventually becomes the pyre on which they are cremated. This ritual connects life and death in search of moksha* (liberation of the soul) through the final ceremony. But will there be moksha because one has carried out all rituals dutifully even if they were staid and monotonous, including presiding over the funerals of others in their lifetime?

*See glossary at the end of the document.

Courtesy: Shailesh Bangallagalu Ramamurthy
«My ideation begins with several drawings that serve as illustrations of my everyday thoughts like rituals or blueprints and documents the possibilities of my work. It imagines the construction of a device that may eventually be an object or exist as a thought. I deal with complex ‘machines’ and simplify them in terms of their physicality and function, to make them more representational of human needs and/or want; just like mechanisms sometimes exist in society irrespective of their actual necessity.

Raised in a small village in South India without access to basic electricity during my childhood, my introduction to mechanics during my higher education greatly fascinated me. This fascination with my practice is applied to solve queries and answer questions of philosophies and existence. My practice remains a reaction not only to an object/practice that I see and interact with, but also its sensibility, meanings, practical, conceptual or metaphorical connotations. I thereby “repurpose” objects to alter their function and inject them with of satire to criticize its political, social or cultural significance.

Before art, I studied Sanskrit. The play between an external beauty or functionality of a form/object, its inner meaning, extended connotations, and the consequential critical analysis of the object is what is embodied in the Tarka Shastra way of thought and is what excites my practice as well.»

Vitarka Samuh is an open collective seeking views, perspectives, models and membership towards a constructive humanitarian dialogue with the objective of informally resolving root causes of discrimination and social injustice in India. Being an informal humanitarian dialogue, we intend to cascade it from the individual down to the family, peers, community, region, country and the world at large.

Thanks to:
Subaraya Ananth Bhat (photograph), Akash Sharma (technical assistance), Ritika Sharma (artist assistance and coordination), Naseem Khan and Atul industries (production assistance), Krupesh Bhat, Jagadheesh Sharma, Venu Vignesh, Gautam Sharma, Vadehra Art Gallery and Sonia Pastor.
Brahma is the creator god in Hinduism, the first member of the Trimurti. The other members of the Trimurti are Vishnu and Shiva.

In Hinduism, Brahman connotes the highest Universal Principle, the Ultimate Reality in the universe. It is the pervasive, genderless, infinite, eternal truth and bliss which does not change, yet is the cause of all changes. Brahman as a metaphysical concept is the single binding unity behind diversity in all that exists in the universe.

Brahminism refers to the religious views and ideology historically promoted by the priestly class of Brahmins in India. It may be used in the context of their domination of Indian society and their Hindu-ideology.

Dharma is a key concept with multiple meanings in Indian religions. There is no single-word translation for dharma in Western languages. In Hinduism, dharma signifies behaviors that are considered to be in accord with Rta, the order that makes life and universe possible and includes duties, rights, laws, conduct, virtues and "right way of living".

Janeu is one of the traditional samskaras (rites of passage) that marked the acceptance of a student by a guru (teacher or tutor) and an individual's entrance to a school in Hinduism. The tradition is widely discussed in ancient Sanskrit texts of India and varies regionally. The sacred thread (yagyopavita or janeu) is received by the boy during this ceremony, that he continues wearing across his chest thereafter.

A lingam sometimes referred to as linga or Shiva linga, is an abstract or aniconic representation of the Hindu deity Shiva in Shaivism.

Moksha is a term in Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism for various forms of emancipation, enlightenment, liberation, and release. In its soteriological and eschatological senses, it refers to freedom from samsara, the cycle of death and rebirth. In its epistemological and psychological senses, moksha is freedom from ignorance: self-realization, self-actualization and self-knowledge. Moksha is considered equivalent to and used interchangeably with other terms such as vimoksha, vimukti, kaivalya, apavarga, mukti, nihsreyasa and nirvana.

Puja is a prayer ritual performed in the morning by Hindus to offer devotional worship to one or more deities, to host and honour a guest, or to spiritually celebrate an event. It may honour or celebrate the presence of special guest(s), or their memories after they die. The word "puja" is Sanskrit, and means reverence, honour, homage, adoration, and worship. Puja, the loving offering of light, flowers, and water or food to the divine, is the essential ritual of Hinduism. For the worshipper, the divine is visible in the image, and the divinity sees the worshipper. The interaction between human and deity, between human and guru, is called darshan, seeing.

Sandhyavandana is a mandatory religious ritual performed, traditionally, by Dvija communities of Hindus, particularly those initiated through
the sacred thread ceremony referred to as the Upanayanam and instructed in its execution by a Guru, in this case one qualified to teach Vedic ritual. The Sandhyavandanam consists of recitation from the Vedas, accompanied by ritual. These rituals are performed three times a day. The Sandhyavandanam is the oldest extant liturgy in world religion. As a practice, it may be descended from the much older daily Agnihotra ritual.

**Sanskrit** is a language of ancient India with a 3,500-year history. It is the primary liturgical language of Hinduism and the predominant language of most works of Hindu philosophy as well as some of the principal texts of Buddhism and Jainism. Sanskrit, in its variants and numerous dialects, was the lingua franca of ancient and medieval India. In the early 1st millennium CE, along with Buddhism and Hinduism, Sanskrit migrated to Southeast Asia, parts of East Asia and Central Asia, emerging as a language of high culture and of local ruling elites in these regions.

**Tarka Sastra** is a science of dialectics, logic and reasoning, and art of debate that analyzes the nature and source of knowledge and its validity. Sastra in Sanskrit means that which gives teaching, instruction or command. Tarka means debate or an argument. According to one reckoning, there are six sastras. Vyakarana is one of them. Four of the sastras are particularly important Vyakarana, Mimamsa, Tarka, and Vedanta.

**Vastu shastra** is a traditional Indian system of architecture originating in India which literally translates to «science of architecture.» These are texts found on the Indian subcontinent that describe principles of design, layout, measurements, ground preparation, space arrangement, and spatial geometry. Vastu Shastras incorporate traditional Hindu and in some cases Buddhist beliefs. The designs are intended to integrate architecture with nature, the relative functions of various parts of the structure, and ancient beliefs utilising geometric patterns, symmetry, and directional alignments.

The **Vedas** are a large body of religious texts originating in ancient India. Composed in Vedic Sanskrit, the texts constitute the oldest layer of Sanskrit literature and the oldest scriptures of Hinduism. Hindus consider the Vedas to be apauruseya, which means «not of a man, superhuman» and «impersonal, authorless».
PRACTICAL INFORMATION
Exhibition from February 14 to May 03.2020.
Open every day except Tuesday, from 2 to 6 PM.
Closed on May 01.
Free admission.

Lectures by Vitarka Samuh, curator
18th March at 6 pm (60 mins): The Homecoming of Indian Politics
1st April at 6 pm (90 mins): Portal to Creative India
Lectures in english (amphitheater 1). Free admission.

Social networks
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La Villa Arson is a public administrative establishment under the aegis of the ministry of Culture. It is supported by the Région SUD Provence-Alpes Côte d'Azur, the Département des Alpes-Maritimes and the City of Nice.
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